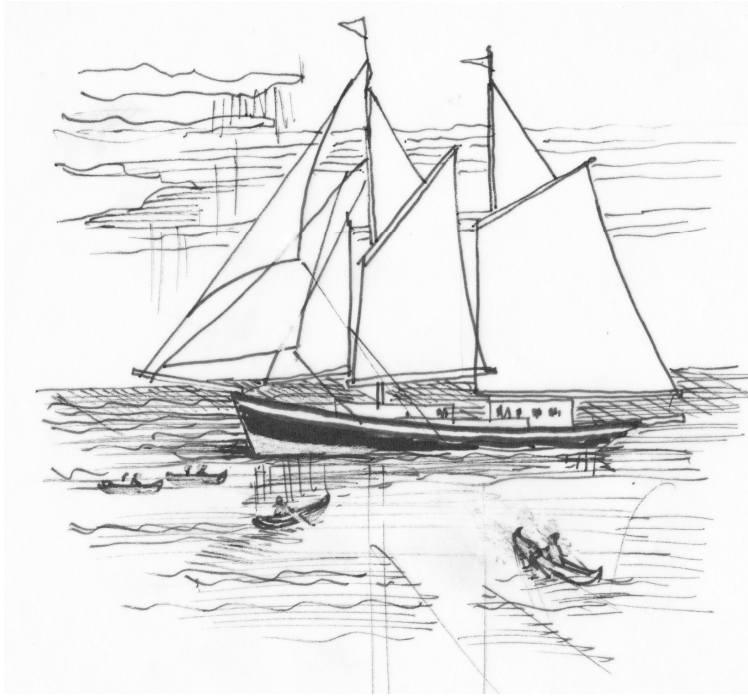


William Bromilow of Dobu, Papua



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The people of Dobu stood on the sandy shore of their island, talking excitedly among themselves as they watched a large, three-masted schooner anchor off-shore. Some, more daring and curious, took to their canoes and paddled at a safe distance, but close enough to watch all the strange activity on the large ship that had unexpectedly appeared.

“Who are these people?”

“Why are they coming on to our island?”

“What are all these things they bring with them?”

Dobu is a small, ‘inactive’ volcanic island lying between Normanby and Ferguson Islands, east of the Papua New Guinea mainland. The only experience the Dobuan people had with Europeans was an occasional visit from the government Administrator or his deputy in their steamship. Now they were witnessing a totally new event, the arrival of a large party of missionaries whose call was to teach the Christian message of salvation to the people of these islands.

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The party was led by Dr. William Bromilow from Australia, accompanied by four other men who would be stationed on other islands in the vicinity. There were also twenty-two South Sea Islanders from Tonga, Fiji and Samoa with wives of a number of them. Traveling on the schooner with them was Dr. George Brown, who led the original missionary party that went from Fiji to New Britain in 1875. There were several other men who were to sail on from the Papuan Islands in the chartered schooner with Dr. Brown to join the mission stations in New Britain.

“We’ve never seen so many white people before.”

“What are they doing here in our place?”

“See how they cover their bodies with all that stuff. It must be hard for them to move with all that on them.” The Dobuans were fascinated with the European clothing!

They continued to observe from a distance, speculating on the variety of strange activities. The new-comers were now unloading their cargo from ship to shore by means of the two whale boats they had brought with them. This caused even more incredulous gasps from the Dobuan on-lookers, for the cargo consisted of building materials for three houses and a store-room, a three-ton cutter as well as supplies of food and goods for several months.

“Look at the things they are bringing ashore. What will they do with them?”

“Some of those people are brown-skinned, a bit like us. They must have come from a different place than the white people.”

“What’s this huge animal they’ve got there? Look, it’s swimming!”

“Yes, it’s swimming, but a man is holding its head up with a rope.”

“And it’s being pulled along by the men in that small boat.”

The animal in question was a cow which had been lowered over the side into the water and was now making its way to shore, towed along behind the small boat. This was the first time the Dobuans had ever seen a cow so it caused them great astonishment. Another source of wonder was the arrival of several dogs, pets of some of the missionaries.

Not far away was the Administrator’s steamer. Sir William MacGregor had come to the area in order to smooth the way for the arrival of the mission party to Dobu. The Dobuans had a reputation in the district as ‘the fiercest and most inveterate head-hunters in all Papua.’ Dobu had been chosen as the site for the new mission for two main reasons. It was central to the islands they wished to reach, and they had remembered the words of their founder, John Wesley, “Go not to those who need you, but to those who need you most.”

It was the year 1891 when this mission party arrived. The vast quantity of building materials and stores, as well as personal effects, had been unloaded and the men began to build the houses and store room. The members of the New Guinea party stayed to assist until the main building work had been completed, and then they returned to the schooner and were on their way to their mission stations in New Britain.

The Dobuan people continued to observe from a distance, for they were aware of the government steamer patrolling their waters, not far away. When finally the Administrator was satisfied that the mission party were settled into their location on Dobu he shook the hands of Dr. Bromilow and his team and set off back to Port Moresby.

The newly arrived missionaries began learning the Dobuan language, aided greatly by the Samoan, Tongan and Fijian pastor-teachers. Regular worship services were held, attended by the mission team and a number of village people. The Dobuans were attracted by the singing and quickly learned simple hymns that had been translated into their own language. They gained much of their Christian understanding by learning to sing these songs. The missionaries gradually extended their worship and teaching meetings to the surrounding villages. The people were attending these meetings in increasing numbers, but there had been no apparent response in the form of a true conversion. But God was preparing for a change.

One day, after the missionaries had been there for nearly two years, a messenger came to Dr. Bromilow, "A woman from the village of Gaula has died. She comes to the Sunday worship every week."

"Oh, yes, I know her," said the missionary, "she's a pleasant woman, and comes to the Sunday worship regularly."

Turning to Alesana, a Samoan pastor-teacher, he asked, "Alesana, could you go now and see the family? Ask them if they want a Christian burial."

Gaula was a small village situated between two high cliffs a little way around the coast from the mission station. Alesana set out at once for Gaula. When he met with the woman's family they said they would like a Christian burial. Alesana went to look at the body of the woman which was ornamented as for the dead.

"There isn't the look of death about this woman," he thought, "she is so still but she doesn't have the stamp on death on her face."

Turning to the people he said, "Would you be willing to wait till tomorrow for the burial? I'm not sure this woman is really dead."

The sorcerers who lived in the village were angry. "We want her buried straight away! There's no need to wait. Of course she's dead."

But the other villagers said, "Yes, we can wait. We'll see if she comes back to life by tomorrow."

During the night the woman revived. When Alesana returned in the morning she was strong enough to tell him what she had experienced.

"I was dead," she began, "and my spirit went to heaven. I met Jesus there. He is so good. I am so bad."

She paused for a time, then, her face showing the joy of what she had experienced, she continued, "I saw two roads, one was straight and the other crooked. I was standing on the straight one and I asked Jesus if I was on the right one. He told me that I was. Then I went on to the gate of heaven and saw inside. It was a beautiful place, but Jesus would not allow me to go inside. He told me to return and tell my people that the worship of the missionaries' God is true. He told me also that I was to return because I was not ready, and the missionary and his wife would tell me about heaven."

The woman spoke with such conviction that there was no doubting the reality of her experience. It was clear that this woman had stored up in her heart and mind the teaching she had heard, and God had confirmed it in her spirit while she visited the gates of heaven.

During the next three weeks Dr. Bromilow and his wife visited the woman several times, teaching her the simple truths of God's love shown through Jesus Christ. Her constant word was always, "Jesus is so good, so good. There is no sickness in heaven."

"Are you afraid to die?" Mrs. Bromilow asked her one day.

"No" was her prompt reply, "I want to die and go to the beautiful place."

Laying on a mat under a house the woman was very weak. But news of how she had revived had spread, bringing a small crowd of curious onlookers, listening amazed and wondering at her remarkable words.

"Wouldn't you like to recover and grow strong again?" an onlooker asked her.

"No, no!" she replied, "I want to go to the beautiful land where there is no pain."

The end came three weeks after her rescue from burial and was quite triumphant. In her last moments the woman joined in singing with two of the missionaries a hymn that had been translated into Dobuan.

It began, "There are angels hovering all around".

This incident stirred up a great deal of interest in the village people. Here was one of their own people who had experienced the truth of what the missionaries had told them. There must be some truth in their message, they thought.

Not long after the woman's death five young men came to see Dr. Bromilow one evening. They had questions they wanted answered.

"We have heard much concerning Jesus Christ, and we would like to know where He is."

"Is the church building the house of Jesus Christ?"

"Is this house of yours the house of Jesus Christ?"

"Where is He? We cannot see Him or hear Him."

"Are you Jesus Christ?"

Such simple, yet deep questions opened up the way for these men to learn to know God and His Son, Jesus Christ. As they reached the point of decision to follow the Christian way they encouraged their friends in the villages to also seek to know God. Those who became believers were persecuted and tested by the opposing forces of the sorcerers, but this only made them stronger in their faith. It was three years after the first missionaries arrived on Dobu that the first baptisms took place.

There were three people baptised in that first service. The first was a thirty-five year old man whose wife constantly scolded him, trying unsuccessfully to draw him away from his new faith. Next was a twenty year old whose family strongly opposed his decision, but he too had stood firm. The third was a boy about thirteen, who had been particularly dirty and unkempt when he first appeared at the mission station. But the missionaries had taken an interest in him and he became a keen and ready learner of the Christian way. The remarkable change in his appearance and behaviour had been noticed by all in the village. His crucial test came when his village chief commanded him to steal. He refused and chose rather to be punished than to disobey his God. After the death of the Gaula woman these were the first of many Dobuans who became Christians and reached out to the people on the islands around them.

Chief Gaganumore

One of the Dobuan warrior chiefs, Gaganumore by name, had a well deserved reputation as a fearless warrior, and a cannibal. He was a leading standard bearer for the warring parties that raided the villages on the nearby islands, so he was held in high esteem and some fear. When the British arrived in Papua New Guinea a few years before, they attempted to enforce some law and order in the island communities and, because of his renown as a warrior, Gaganumore was one of their targets. The government officers made it clear that Gaganumore's head-hunting had to stop, so he was a marked man.

"Gaganumore, I see the smoke from the government boat over the sea. It's coming this way," one of his friends would call, if they saw the official steamer on the horizon.

"I'm going into the bush, then," Gaganumore would respond. "They're not going to catch me." He would remain in hiding until the steamer was gone and the coast was clear.

So, once the mission party had arrived on Dobu and appeared to be settled in happily, the Administrator, Sir William MacGregor sailed off. But, before he left he gave an instruction to Dr. Bromilow:

"Tell Gaganumore from me that if he will mend his ways and cease his head-hunting and raiding parties that we will forgive him and not try to capture him. Our hope is that your Christian teaching will change the attitude of warriors like Gaganumore."

Sure enough, as soon as the Administrator's steamer was well clear of Dobu, Gaganumore came out of hiding and presented himself at the door of Dr. Bromilow's newly-built house. He brought with him an interpreter who could speak a little pidgin. Gaganumore said, "I'm glad to see you on our island, but we don't want any more white people here."

Dr. Bromilow learned much later that the whole mission party had been in danger of being killed only a month after their arrival. One day a message reached the mission team, "There's going to be a cannibal feast tonight at the village over there." The village concerned was two miles away. One of the missionaries immediately reacted, "We mustn't let them do this evil thing. I'm going to the village to stop it!"

Bursting into the village, he tried to intervene, without success. The cannibal feast went on. But the village men were angry at the intervention and plotted to kill all the missionaries.

"We'll go to the mission station, and a few of us will surround each missionary and keep them separated while we talk to them. Then we will kill each one. Gaganumore and another older warrior heard of their plot and gathered the young warriors together to reason with them.

“If you kill them, “they said, “what about their friends in the government? They’ll come to visit them and find them dead. Then they’ll punish us and be our enemies. Let’s wait and see what they are like. If they are good to live with we will adopt them into our tribe. If they’re not, we can kill them when we choose.”

Fortunately the counsel of the older men was heeded and the missionaries’ lives were saved. When Dr. Bromilow told Gaganumore of the Administrator’s pardon on condition that he reformed his behaviour, the warrior would not believe him. Nevertheless, he did become a regular attendant at worship services, asking questions and discussing the teaching with Dr. Bromilow when he found it hard to understand. “It will be a long time before I understand this teaching, it is all so different from our village ways,” he would comment.

It is hardly surprising that he found it difficult to understand. From a young child he had been trained to be a special warrior, going through heathen rituals with the older men to recognise him as such. The only way he knew to resolve all situations was to kill.

But gradually, Gaganumore was changing. Dr. Bromilow and he became more than teacher and disciple, they were firm friends. Gaganumore’s outbursts of anger became fewer. He was learning, with Dr. Bromilow’s help and guidance, to respond in Christian ways to those who did him harm.

One day Dr. Bromilow came upon a group of men working on a large canoe.

“This is a very big canoe,” commented the missionary, “what do you intend to use it for?”

“We started to build it some time ago,” began one of the men, “We were going to use it for pay back. The brother of Gaganumore was killed in a fight at Eneute some time ago and we wanted to pay them back for that.”

“But when you came you talked to us about living at peace with our neighbours,” added another man, “so we hid the canoe away in the bush and never finished it.”

“But now we thought of another way to use it,” continued the first spokesman, “now that we have peace instead of war, we could use the canoe for trade, not fighting.”

Dr. Bromilow was very pleased to hear of their plans. “What a wonderful idea,” he exclaimed, “you’ve been leaders in fighting before, now you can be leaders in making peace.”

“Do you have a name for the canoe?” he went on.

“We called it Eneute because that was where we were planning to take it for war, but we should give it a new name. What do you think, Dr Bromilow?”

The missionary thought for a minute, then made a suggestion, “Why not name it for Mrs. Bromilow? The Fijian word for ‘respected lady’ is ‘Marama’. Would you like to call it ‘Marama’?” And so they did.

There was much excited celebration when the canoe, specially decorated for the occasion, was launched and taken for its first short voyage on the seas off Dobu. "What a beautiful canoe!" See how it rides the waves so smoothly!"

Everybody was thrilled to watch the canoe as the men paddled it along the coast, close to land, and then swing around so the stern faced the shore. This was a sure sign that it was a canoe of peace.

Later the missionaries watched anxiously as the canoe paddled past their homes, pointing in the direction of Eneute.

"What are they up to?"

"Have they changed their minds?"

"Surely they're not going to Eneute after all."

The missionaries were dismayed. But not for long. The canoe stopped. A young warrior stood up in the bow holding a coconut which, in one blow, he split in half and poured out the contents.

"What was that about?" Dr Bromilow asked Gaganumore.

"That's to say that we will not fight the Eneute people. Peace has come upon us," he replied.

Dr. Bromilow could see that there was a real struggle going on in Gaganumore's heart, the struggle between the old way of fighting and revenge and the new way of peace. For him this was a significant moment of decision to abandon the old life and follow the Christian way of peace. As the canoe intended for war was used to bring the Christian message to other island villages, to bring people to worship services, to help those in need, so Gaganumore's life changed from anger and revenge to doing good for people.

There came a serious drought which particularly affected the area of Miadeba, the old enemy of Dobu across the water, on Ferguson Island. Gaganumore came to Dr. Bromilow with a suggestion. "The people at Miadeba are suffering greatly. I think I should go over in the canoe and offer to bring some of them back to my village. There is enough food in our gardens to feed both them and us."

Dr. Bromilow was glad to hear of this plan and encouraged him to carry it out. Here was a sure sign that Gaganumore had become a true Christian. After six years on Dobu the Bromilows left for a trip back to Australia. Gaganumore came to see Dr. Bromilow a short time before his departure.

"How long will you be gone, my friend?" he asked.

"Eleven moons," was Bromilow's reply.

Gaganumore produced a length of bush string and proceeded to tie eleven knots in it. He asked Dr. Bromilow to find a piece of string in which he was to tie eleven knots. Then they exchanged strings, after which Gaganumore explained the purpose of the exchange.

“When you are in your own land and a new moon appears, cut off one knot, so that you will remember me, and I will do the same, until you return.”

When Dr. Bromilow returned 11 months later, Gaganumore was among the first to greet him, joining the happy group who carried him ashore on their shoulders. As a mark of appreciation Sir William MacGregor gave Gaganumore a special baton denoting him government chief of the district. He took his office very seriously and carried out his duties well.

Dr. Bromilow described his parting with Gaganumore when he was finally leaving Dobu: ‘To part was not easy for either of us. Gaganumore said, “I will not wait for the ship to take you away. I could not bear it. When you came to us Dobu was like hell, but you brought love to us. Now that you are going away you are taking your goods, but you cannot take away that love. It will remain with the holy Book you have given us.” We held each other’s hands for a few moments. What deeds his hands had done! But I have never known a truer clasp of friendship. Then he turned and was gone.’

Adapted from:

Twenty Years Among Primitive Papuans, William Bromilow, Epworth Press, London
Extract from the Diaries of Miss J. Tinney, Methodist Mission, British New Guinea 1892-1902